Pacific Northwest Rappel Academy

Standardizing operations among all rappel crews in the Pacific Northwest has been a regional priority for 15 years. The bases have all supported each other with "booster" rappellers for years, but training the region's rappellers in one large group – academy style – was a significant step forward in efforts toward standardization. Enhancing the booster program necessitated cross-training all regional rappellers in each of the region's aircraft. Because the program has as many as five different makes and models of aircraft on contract during the season, the required number of rappels for veteran crewmembers could be as many as 15, and rookies could be required to do up to 20 rappels.

The new cross-training during the academy significantly reduced the time involved in boosting a base with different make and model aircraft.

A primary goal of rappel training is to put highly qualified firefighters on the ground with a minimum of risk. The academy's goal was to produce rappellers who are as versatile as possible – rappellers who can support other bases with minimum disruption and lost time during high initial attack activity.

Because the academy focused on reducing risk and cost during training, rappel staff re-thought the traditional way that training had been conducted. The current Interagency Helicopter Rappel Guide (IHRG) procedures require eight initial training rappels in one aircraft make and model for each rookie.

Additional aircraft that the rappeller is subsequently qualified to rappel from require numerous on-the-ground mock-ups and three rappels prior to qualification. Veteran rappellers are required to do three re-qualification rappels from one aircraft and then three more from each additional aircraft. A number of different helicopters are used in rappel operations, and model-specific procedures are required, but only three exit styles are used. For years it's been a standard that training was conducted specific to each make and model aircraft. The new concept employed by the academy was that the issue is exit style rather than aircraft make and model.

The academy proposed this new approach to the Washington Office in order to reduce the required number of rappels, flight time, and time in training. The proposal was approved on a trial basis and was tested during the 2003 rappel academy. The Bell 206L-IV was then added, and the program was tested again in 2004.

Rappel candidates completed their tower training (medium helicopter platform with an over-the-skid exit) and then moved to the aircraft and completed mock-ups and qualifying rappels. They then moved back to the tower for light helicopter training in a similar procedure.

Each rappeller completed eight rappels from four aircraft:

- Four medium platform with over-the-skid exits
- Three light platform with over-the-skid exits
- One light platform with through-the-skid exit

In 2003 this modified training approach reduced the number of training rappels by 540 – a 41 percent decrease from the year before. Net savings to the 2003 academy was $48,000. In 2004, employing this same training plan and adding the Bell 206L-IV to the list of aircraft on the proposal, the academy realized an additional reduction of 180 rappels with an estimated savings of $59,000. Financial savings notwithstanding, a noteworthy benefit was the significant reduction in risk exposure to both agency and contractor personnel.

This program innovation was accomplished through the hard work and collaborative efforts of personnel at all levels of the region's rappel program and Washington Office Aviation.